Clancy the Teacher

Throughout his career as a writer and a critic, Laurie Clancy was also a teacher. He put as much thought and energy into this as he did into his other responsibilities, and is remembered fondly by his students from La Trobe University, where he lectured in English and Australian Literature, and RMIT, where he taught creative writing in the TAFE Division. These memoirs give a glimpse of him in the classroom, and acknowledge the lasting effects of his work.
—John McLaren.

FIONA CAPP
La Trobe University

When I was at university in the 1908s, it wasn't uncommon for academics to assume that their learned presence was all that was required of them. They knew how to lecture but not how to teach. Some didn't even know how to lecture. Some said very little in tutorials, as if it was up to the students to intuit what the tutor wanted to hear or to draw out of the tutor what they needed to know. The clever students, it was assumed, would be on the teacher's wave length; as for the less precocious, well, that was their problem. But thankfully, there were also academics, like Laurie Clancy, who were genuine teachers, who knew that teaching is a conversation, an exchange of ideas and knowledge; that it is about infecting students with your enthusiasm and understanding of a subject, and fostering any glimmers of insight and originality students might show.

After finishing school, I did the first year of my BA at Melbourne University but was deeply unhappy there. I'd been to a private school and Melbourne University felt like another, bigger, private school; another enclave of privilege. I decided to take a year off and then switched to La Trobe University, where I immediately felt at home. La Trobe was my kind of place—the native bush setting, the lack of pretension, the friendly, welcoming atmosphere of the English Department.

Although I didn't have Laurie as a teacher until third year, when I did Australian Literature, I was aware of him as a literary figure as well as an academic, someone who wrote newspaper book reviews and fiction, as well as academic books. Back then, it was relatively unusual to combine academic work and creative writing, and as I had hopes of writing fiction and journalism, I was inspired by his example. When I told him I was interested in literary journalism, he encouraged me to write book reviews for the *Australian Book Review* and put me in touch with the then editor, John McLaren. This generosity was typical of him.

As a big fan of the poetry of Judith Wright, I had a special passion for Australian literature. A lesser teacher, especially one who secretly harboured the belief that Australian literature *was* second-rate—a not uncommon view in universities at the time—could have easily quashed or undermined this enthusiasm. Laurie did the opposite. Being self-conscious and reserved, I was never particularly talkative in tutorials but I remember feeling different in Laurie's tutorials. Laurie made you feel you had something worthwhile to contribute, even if he didn't agree with it. He had a way of being deeply serious—in his very deep voice—and playful at the same time.

Reading over the only essay of mine I can find that he marked for that subject, I am struck by a number of things. That the copy book precision and neatness of his tiny handwriting was

curiously at odds with his big, slightly shambling presence. That his comments were written as a kind of dialogue, as if he were talking to you, making droll remarks, being appreciative where he thought it was warranted and offering his own views when they differed from critics you might be quoting. The essay topic was: '"Second-rate sensibilities employing second-hand poetic tools." Is there no more to be said for the Colonial poets than this?' At one point I observed that Henry Kendall was sensitive to accusations of being derivative and of plagiarism. In the margin Laurie wrote, 'It's odd—he's never been near the English Department, either.'

Laurie combined gravitas and humour; an extraordinary wealth of knowledge with characteristic self-deprecation. Whenever you ran into him, he would say, 'G'day' and then look down at his feet. He didn't do small talk. He had a way with meaningful pauses. And when he spoke, you knew he had something to say.

LIANA STATI
RMIT

The first class Laurie took we read Banjo Patterson. I remember thinking, Jesus, I hope there isn't going to be too much vintage Australiana in this. Because Laurie was very Australian—he loved football and cricket—but he was all the best things about being Australian. He was kind. He accepted, with grace, the egos and complexes, the bruised emotions and fraught contests of a class full of students who all wanted to be great.

Laurie himself appeared to have no ego to speak of. He had soft watery eyes and tiny handwriting. He never overstated himself. He didn't set himself apart.

Everyone had a turn in class, and even those whose turn seemed to endure forever were carefully considered. In the same way, those who preferred the shadow lands were also respected. Laurie didn't force anything. He made our classroom a place of refuge, a place safe enough to take risks.

Laurie's grammar was impeccable, his vocabulary, gargantuan. I remember that he once explained irony, off the top of his head, without hesitation. He was the most widely read literary scholar I have ever met.

It was hard to get a high mark from Laurie. He wasn't gratuitous; he made you sweat for it. And that effort united us. Those few who managed to achieve it were greatly admired by the rest of us.

After class, we would often assemble at the Lincoln pub down the road. Laurie was fond of his red wine and could clearly handle it quite well.

He was one of us from the beginning.

Laurie was generous. He would offer to read our manuscripts in his spare time. Who else would do that? He would turn up to each of our student open reading nights and stand amongst us, drinking red. Freely chatting. Laughing. Laurie was never vain, or elitist, or mental, or even irritated. He was just a lovely adorable bloke.

Quite naturally, not in a contrived or forced way, the relationship between student and teacher became more personal. Laurie was genuinely interested in his student charges. And we were drawn towards his laconic style and his wit. He had something of the larrikin in him, but he was articulate, open minded, accepting. It was easy to hang out with Laurie, to stop and have a laugh with him in the street. He just became our friend. And I, for one, felt honoured. I grew to adore Laurie, and considered him to be a giant of a man; one of the most special people I have ever met. Even now, it is still difficult to think of him without tears overflowing.

One day in class, I remember a student challenging him, saying that we only ever read dark stories. Laurie explained that they were often the most interesting, but he went home that night and wrote a short story with a happy ending. When he read this story out to us in the next class, we were all touched, especially the student who had complained.

In a decidedly oddball way, we travelled the world with Laurie, a bunch of disparate students, hardly cohesive, with complex, chaotic lives, led by a tall man who seemed to grow taller the longer we knew him.

We never returned to Banjo Patterson again and I never imagined that the world could be so crowded with brilliance. Laurie showed me the vastness of the sky. He taught me about the delicacy of restraint. He taught me to use my ears to hear with. He reminded me to see poetry in the small, ordinary moments of life.

In Laurie's classes, we learnt to fly with an eagle and for me it was a conscious feeling of real joy.

Everybody loved Laurie.

He was my noble teacher. My mighty friend.

PETE NICHOLSON
RMIT

I came to Laurie's short story class young and green and having read and written very little. In those days I felt like literature was some foreign land, to be traversed with great effort at some later, tweed-clad period of one's life. I'd always loved words and writing, but, owing to a bone-dry high school literature class, had come to associate capital-L Literature with a certain stuffiness and condescension and bloodlessness, a cool remove of mind that seemed to me at odds with the conjuring feats I felt great writing to be capable of.

Laurie was a singularly unpretentious man, and it was his great humility and humour—a vulnerability, straightforwardness and warmth that hinted at the true work involved in not just writing well, but in giving anything of value to others, and actually becoming a better human—that helped to relieve me quickly of this and a number of other unhealthy assumptions about books and writing, and which drew me to him immediately.

Laurie had clearly read a great deal; he could talk with great fluency and passion about the canon and the writers he admired. But what he really cared about, so far as I could see, was the power of words to do actual things to actual people, and this understanding about writing was

one of his great gifts to me. He encouraged us all to bring in stories we admired, and he would go through them with us, patiently and at length, helping us to discover what we felt resided in them, rather than telling us what was there. He would go through our own work in a similar way, gently fostering in us a keener sense of the many and varied ways in which writing succeeds and fails, and the many grey areas, stylistic and otherwise, in between. He encouraged us to take risks, to go wherever our writing might take us.

With Laurie, crucially, there were no Golden Rules of Literature that had to be memorised and etched in our brains and carried forth; there were definite things to understand and observe, but what really mattered was what we actually would come to rely on—our own intuitive sense of language and of feeling, which, like a needy child that never grows up, would always require feeding and discipline and attention.

In one early class he had us read a story by a well-known writer and discuss how we felt about it. It was a fine story, most of us said, thinking that its very appearance in front of us meant that it had to be. Laurie agreed it was a good story. Then one of us said that they felt the story went on perhaps a few lines too long, and Laurie lit up—he seemed genuinely excited by the idea that a good story could have been made even better, no matter who wrote it. To Laurie, it seemed, there was just the matter of writing, and our doing it as well as we could. He spoke plainly and with great humour and insight to this end about his own long history of writing.

Laurie always managed to come at writing from both sides, combining the fantastic (the awe and magic of literature) and the terrible (the practical reality of actually writing) in such a way that we understood they were very much part of the same thing. He didn't sugar-coat it: writing is hard. To do it well means failing sometimes and being rejected; spending a lot of time wondering about your own worthiness or lack thereof; being alone for extended periods, trying to conjure words that often won't come. But he also instilled in us the notion that just doing it, as difficult as it can be sometimes, brings great rewards: getting better at it, sure, but also developing our awareness of all those things of which writing is just a mirror. Writing, finally, was about discovery, of ourselves and others and all things besides, and Laurie, by his teaching and his human example, communicated this as honestly and as well as just about anyone.

KATE HOLDEN
RMIT

Laurie Clancy didn't really teach me anything. I never saw him at a whiteboard jotting down words as students called out suggestions. He didn't give out sheets with blank spaces to be filled in. There's no recollection of his attitude to adverbs or dangling modifiers; I'm not sure he made much effort to keep the class roll, when he was teaching at RMIT in the Professional Writing and Editing course all those years. But he knew all our names. He knew our writing, where it had come from, how we might hope it could arrive, the damp and secret unfurlings of it. The risks of exposing our fragile words, and the glee as fellow-students became writer-colleagues, initiates, a cabal. He gave grades but as with the best teachers, the comments beside them were worth much more. And when I presented him with a folder full of lovingly formatted and explicit if lyrical gay erotica for my semester portfolio submission, he only looked up, quizzical and amused, and said he'd get to it as soon as he could, once he'd worked out what criteria to judge it by.

He was a teacher who taught by suggestion: the suggestion of encouragement; of digression and diversion; of patient craft; of the gravelled, pebbly riverbed of the history of writing; of the worth of the attempt; of collaboration and collegiality, privacy and contemplation. He was the man who sat behind the desk at the front, who brought the material for us to discuss and who read the manuscripts we produced; but he was a student of writing as we were, and he never told us how to do anything. Only how to try.

I came to RMIT as a former heroin addict and exile and street worker and, following the previous few months working in Shanghai as the worst ESL teacher in the world, a young woman with few obvious prospects. Creative writing was not the most practical of solutions. I was in love with a completely impoverished man in Italy and mostly resolved to return to sex work, finance a return to him, and spend my life in ramshackle Naples with a quasi-illiterate carpenter husband and seventeen bambini. The RMIT course, I thought balefully, would get six months of my time and then most likely be junked. My first class was with Laurie. In a sun-filled room I sat with a dozen other students and listened negligently as Laurie told us we'd be looking at the short story, studying some of the greats and writing our own. I gazed out the window. He asked us to come back the next week with a page describing our own writing, ambitions and qualities. In mine, jotted that night, I said loftily that I thought I was a vignettist, that I loved punctuation, and that fiction wasn't really my thing. Laurie took the exercises from us the next week; and kept them to return at the end of the year to those of us who persisted with the subject. Inevitably, devoted by then, we took them back with sheepish smiles and read them with a fine degree of irony. He handed mine to me with a look I understood perfectly.

Laurie never baulked when, six months after the beginning of the course, I returned from a mid-year trip with the Italian relationship over, my fate with RMIT sealed and a 10,000-word clench of romantic anguish on paper. He let me read it aloud to the class that week; and the next week; and the next week; and the next; each time I scraped my mind's claws down those pages, perfecting the honed pain of every word, he let me read the draft all over again, all one dreadful obsessive hour of it. He said only, with his characteristic mild smile, that it seemed to be getting better. (I am glad to say he wasn't completely humouring my mania: that story became the last third of my second published memoir, *The Romantic*.)

And yet he felt deeply the reality of his students. He grieved along with us when things went wrong. When I was ill the next year I heard a report that, questioned about his melancholy in another class, he had said he was terribly worried about a student. He talked genially as we strolled down the corridor after class, and inquired gently after our news. He had an open invitation to give him material to read, no matter how long or off-piste; he gave me a ride in the car with his son; always bent his great height to listen closely. His phlegmatic hound-dog face, his watery kind eyes, his huge ancient jumpers: kindness. He was a kind man to me.
He nominated me for the first and only prize I have ever won, the in-house program end-of-year award, the Judy Duffy Prize for Excellence in Literature Against the Odds, named for a former program teacher who had passed away and who had appreciated struggle. I was the single nominee, and only because I'd confided in Laurie my adventures and he'd been very discreet but he thought I deserved encouragement. The award made it into my publishing bio a year later as a minor detail, was repeated without my knowledge by overseas publishers, mentioned in introductions to my speaking events, referred to reverently in all my promotional material: the Duffy Award for Literary Excellence, it became; in hushed tones, the Judy. One of these days someone will find out it was a small and uncontested (if thrilling to me) encomium given on a warm Tuesday night in Carlton and not, after all, the Australian equivalent of the

Booker. I never remembered to tell Laurie the helplessly inflating consequence of his generous gesture but oh, I wish, I wish I had.

When in the second year of the program I was made offers for the publication of my first book it was Laurie who helped me speed-learn a lawyer's expertise on publishing contracts. He found an actual lawyer friend to do a pro bono read-through of the ms for me and read the entire thing himself, as well. He never blanched at my graphic descriptions of sex work and drug use, and his pride and cheer at the success of my book registered with me when all else at that time was a fuddlement of numbed modesty and overwhelmed shyness. And he did me the compliment of asking for my comments on some fiction of his, real comments, as a peer, as a colleague: how seriously and responsibly I put myself to finding his faults!

Only Laurie could have had me, who was spending her nights furiously writing erotic fanfiction until dawn, in a classroom on the other side of town on a Monday morning at nine a.m. Only Laurie could there have tortured me with endless Alice Munro and James Joyce short stories, a series of New Yorker exquisitries 'sparkling with epiphanic dew' as Michael Chabon calls them, which drove me berserk with frustration and loud scorn—only Laurie would have let me enjoy myself so much in hating them. When I pronounced a Margaret Atwood story about a tiny house a metaphor for the narrowing vagina he only gave me that mild, amused, darkly wise glance and disagreed. When I said Joyce was a sanctimonious bore he was nobly offended. When we read Barbara Baynton and I liked her he wasn't surprised. Over two years of classes we wrangled our way through various of the giants of 20th century short fiction and every time he made us read a piece I loathed I learned something. As I did whenever I workshopped a piece of mine I adored and the other students, quite properly, loathed it.

And Laurie himself gave me the most astute piece of criticism I ever had, even more than any of Michael Heyward, my legendary editor. When we met for one of our occasional convivialities (Laurie in the dark bar of the Lincoln, the haggard old jumper, the book he was reading put aside, an immensely tall shadow to my sun-dazed eyes as I came in from the summer heat; he would always gallantly shout me the wine and the food, too) he returned the manuscript of my first attempt at a novel, generously read in his own time and carefully annotated. An atmospheric, subtle psychological evocation of a young girl's sexual maturing within the context of a supernatural, mythic haunting in the lyrically described English countryside, 60,000 exceptionally beautiful words of it: 'I've never read a book in which so little happens,' he wrote with warm, beautiful, desolate and very Laurie honesty in the margin.

I rewrote the book three more times until things happened. I still hate Alice Munro's stories and all that epiphanic crap. I wish I'd kept all the drafts of 'Tutte le Tre,' with Laurie's patient neat handwriting in the margins of every anguished page of romantic self-pity. He never particularly taught me anything. He was my mentor, a quiet model, a lovely colleague—'a scholar and a gentleman' I always called him. He was diligent, humble in his work, patient and persistent, a sharp observer and a sympathetic friend. 'A great tree is falling,' I wrote to him as he was dying. He never taught me to be a writer but he taught me to try.

STEVEN CARROLL
La Trobe University

The first time I met Laurie Clancy in the early 1980s I hated him. I had to. He was standing at one end of a cricket pitch with a bat in his hand, I was standing at the other end with the ball.

The conventions of the encounter demanded nothing less than hostility. I knew him from La Trobe University where our paths had crossed and where I'd completed a very poor arts degree, majoring in literature. Laurie didn't teach me then (only in my post-graduate studies), but I knew him by reputation. He not only taught literature, he wrote the stuff. He was an author. A published one, and a prize winning one. I'd written a few short stories and when the match was finished and hostility was no longer required, I asked him if he had time to read a couple. He agreed to. A few days later he returned them to me, and the first of Laurie's invaluable advice followed. So did friendship. Soon we were exchanging stories, as well as opinions and criticisms. I know that I benefitted enormously from what Laurie had to say, and I can only hope that whatever I offered was of some value. He was an astute critic, and an honest one. But, above all, he always had the trick of making you feel good about your own writing. For Laurie had a quality that is, often as not, rarely found in literary circles—generosity. No one was such a generous spirit in terms of the time he took to read your work, the encouragement he gave and the genuine happiness he derived from what little success along the way you might have got. This was all evident in his speech when he launched my first novel, *Remember Me, Jimmy James*—it was wise, funny and selfless. And I still remember specific lines. Just as I remember all those wonderful dinners, the wit, the spirit of fun that was always there, and those final drinks for the road that always seemed like such a good idea at the time (as well as the subsequent cricket matches in which we played on the same side most of the time).

When I spoke at the launch of Laurie's novel *Night Parking*, I said, and I repeat it now, that Laurie is not only a distinctive and singular voice in Australian fiction, he is one of those writers through which a culture defines itself. He was also the one I'd ring when I was trying to work out just what I thought about something—be it writing or politics—because I figured he'd know the answer. And he usually did. His opinion *mattered.* And, even now, when such occasions arise, the impulse is to pick up the phone and call Laurie. He's gone, but he's not. He'll never be gone. And I *won't* be surprised if one day I do pick up the phone, dial the old number and he answers, and we talk just as we always did.